

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Vayeshev
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Vayeshev – Rewarding the effort, not the outcome

In this week's Parasha of Vayeshev, we read of the tragic dispute amongst Yaakov's children. The brothers are convinced that Yosef is dangerous and does not deserve to be a part of Hashem's chosen people. They plot to kill him. Their judgement appears to be clouded by jealousy.

Reuven, the oldest, tries unsuccessfully to convince the other brothers not to harm Yosef. However, ultimately it is Yehuda who takes the leadership role. He convinces the other brothers not to kill Yoseph, but rather to sell him as a slave (Breishit 37:26).

Let's take a closer look at the pasukim that describes Reuven's involvement.

*“And Reuven heard [the brothers' plot against Yosef] **and he saved him from their hands** and he said: ‘Let's not strike him with a deadly blow’.” (Breishit 37:21).*

Reuven is credited with saving Yosef from the hands of his brothers. But that is not what happened.

*“And Reuven said to them: “Do not shed blood. Throw him into this pit which is in the desert and do not raise a hand against him” **in order to save him from their hands** to return him to his father.” (Breishit 37:22).*

Rashi explains that the words “in order to save him from their hands” is testimony by the Torah that Reuven was planning to save Yosef. He was planning to return later and rescue Yosef from the pit. Meanwhile, while Yosef was languishing in the pit, the other brothers are planning what to do with him. Then Yehuda successfully convinces the brothers that there would be no gain from killing Yosef and they should rather sell him as a slave. When Reuven returns to rescue Yosef, he is too late. Yosef has already been sold as a slave.

In light of Rashi's explanation, the bolded text in pasuk 21 (see above) doesn't seem to make sense. Why is Reuven credited with saving Yosef from the hands of his brothers, when he did not in fact succeed in doing so? Because Reuven had the intention and he tried his best to save Yosef. We can learn from this that if we genuinely try to do a good deed but we are unsuccessful, Hashem credits us as if we were successful.

Imagine if the same were true in the physical world. Someone reached into the cupboard for a container of medicine, but accidentally took a container of poison. If they inadvertently swallowed the poison, their body would suffer the harmful effects. It doesn't matter that they intended to consume the medicine. In contrast, in Hashem's mercy he runs the spiritual world in a different way. He often gives us reward for our intentions, even if those intentions don't bear fruit.

Our job is to emulate Hashem and act in a G-dly manner. We too should try to recognise people's efforts, even if those efforts are not successful. This situation may crop up regularly in our lives, especially when it comes to our children. Consider the following story¹:

Nicholas was a very earnest boy in Grade 5. He very much wanted to do something special for his mother's birthday. He saved up his pocket money for weeks. On the way to school on the morning of her birthday he stopped off at a florist to buy the nicest bunch of flowers that he could afford. He carefully placed the bunch of flowers in his school bag. That probably wasn't the smartest place to

¹ Based on a story in “Nicholas and the Gang” by René Goscinny.

keep the flowers. His bag was thrown around quite a bit, as is common with Grade 5 boys. At the end of the school day he took the bunch of flowers out of his bag and carried them in his hand. Some of the petals had fallen off and the stems were a bit bent. On the way home he stopped for his usual game of soccer with his friends and left the flowers on the sideline. The flowers got a bit more squashed when other school bags were thrown on top them. On the way home he dropped the bunch of flowers a few times and once they landed in a muddy puddle of water. By the time he got home all of the petals had fallen off and the bunch of flowers was a dirty, soggy bunch of broken stems. His mother was delighted. She told him it was the best present that she had ever received. And she meant it.

It may be easier to recognise and praise the efforts of our children because we naturally empathise with them, and we don't expect their attempts to always bear fruit. rely on the success of their efforts. But it can be harder if we are personally affected by the success or failure of someone else's efforts. Consider the following scenarios:

- Rachel had been looking for a shidduch for a number of years. Her friend Leah thought of someone for her, and she went to a lot of trouble to investigate his background and set up the first date. Unfortunately, the date was a disaster. Rachel knew straight away that it was a waste of time.
- David was out of work and looking for a new position. His friend Shimon set up an interview for him with a very good company. David was very keen but unfortunately the interview didn't go so well, and he wasn't offered the job.
- Sharon's car wouldn't start. Her brother came over to her house to try to fix it up for her. Unfortunately, he ended up doing more damage than good. Sharon missed an important meeting, and she now had an expensive repair bill as well.

If people try to help us but they are unsuccessful, we may instinctively feel angry or frustrated at the outcome and end up blaming them for their involvement. However, we can work hard to overcome our natural instincts and instead emulate Hashem and genuinely appreciate them and their efforts.

This idea also helps with how we view ourselves. We need to remember that the success of our efforts is always due to Hashem and not within our realm of control. Our job in this world is to put in the appropriate level of hishtadlut (effort) and then let go of the results. If we genuinely try our best to get something done but we are not successful, we must trust that Hashem did not want us to succeed at that point, for whatever reason.

We should also bear in mind that we never know the real outcome of someone's actions. Going back to or Parasha, there is another explanation for the words "and he saved him". It could be that Reuven managed to delay the brothers for long enough for Yehuda to come up with the plan to sell Yosef. So maybe Reuven's idea to put Yosef in the pit did actually play an indirect role in saving Yosef.

We can apply this reasoning to our scenarios mentioned above. Maybe Rachel's date was a disaster, but by going on the date she was somehow introduced to her soul mate. Or perhaps she learnt some valuable lessons about how to date effectively. Maybe David's interviewer mentioned David to one of their colleagues in a different company and that colleague ultimately offered David his dream job. Maybe Sharon's broken car saved her from being involved in a car accident. Even if we don't see a successful outcome, we need the emunah to recognise that it truly was for our best, and to appreciate the efforts of the people in our lives.

Let's try something this week:

1. Pay attention to other people's efforts to help us. Remember how the Torah recognised Reuven because of his intentions and efforts, not his ultimate success, and try to act in the same way. Even if the person is not successful, they deserve our gratitude.
2. If we are not successful in an endeavour, we must remember to be gentle on ourselves because all we can do is our best. The outcomes of our actions are not up to us, they are up to Hashem, and He ultimately knows what the best outcome is.